Smoke Signals

Marlboro sponsors a series of concerts with high-profile acts — but only smokers are invited

BY RANDALL ROBERTS

If you didn't know that Los Lobos played at Mississippi Nights last Sunday night, you must not smoke Marlboros.

As part of the cigarette-maker's Marlboro Miles series of concerts, Los Lobos played two hours' worth of music, and the only way to gain admission was to present 200 Marlboro Miles — proofs-of-purchase that accompany packs of Marlboro cigarettes — to the doorman at the show. Once inside, guests were treated to a classy buffet, scads of Marlboro literature (a Marlboro cookbook!) and open space galore. No more than 150 people were in attendance at the 1,000-capacity venue.

"We couldn't promote it," says Pat Hagin of Pagan Music, the company that books Mississippi Nights. "That was our agreement with them — that we could not promote the show. It was completely in their court." Hagin noted that, in addition to the "no publicity" pact the club had with the cigarette company, the artists involved had a similar agreement with Marlboro, to avoid the appearance of being sponsored by Marlboro (which Los Lobos are not). The event on Sunday night was booked as a private party, and Los Lobos served as the party band. The result: an internationally successful band in marvelous form that performed for a sparse crowd because most fans didn't know they were in town.

"What we've done in this particular case is given (our customers) one more way that they can use their Miles," says Tara Carraro of the Philip Morris Co., which owns Marlboro. "By creating this special proprietary event — it's only for our consumers, it's something they can only get from Marlboro, and it's a way to create more equity in the brand — (we) create a better relationship with our consumers. It's to give them something extra and to reward them for their brand loyalty." Audience members were notified of the event through the company's mailing list and a few veiled print ads.

The Los Lobos show was the second in a series of Marlboro concerts in October. The first was Oct. 12, a Big Head Todd and the Monsters gig at Blueberry Hill's Duck Room. According to audience members, turnout was equally slim — around 30 people. This for a band that would sell out the space were it publicized. The same holds true for Los Lobos — which commands around $15,000 per performance.

The low turnout doesn't bother the company. "We manufacture and market cigarettes, so our consumers are smokers, and that's who we're interested in. We're just not interested in nonsmokers. Certainly, if there are adult smokers out there who weren't aware of the show, they can — if they want to be added to our mailing list — call our consumer-affairs number, and we can add them."

Once inside, though, information on this coming Monday's event was broadcast regularly over the intercom: "Don't miss next Monday's Marlboro Miles event with ... Soul Asylum." That's this Monday at Mississippi Nights. Better start smoking quick — you need 40 packs' worth of Marlboro miles (800 cigarettes) to gain admission.

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